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Teaching American Studies in the ‘Age of Trump’:

How Transnational and Interdisciplinary Paradigms Can Help Us Negotiate Some of the Challenges of the 21st Century

(Marietta Messmer, University of Groningen)

The election of Donald Trump as 45th President of the United States poses a particular challenge to (European) American Studies scholars at this point in time as we are frequently asked to explain developments such as the intensification of (white) nationalism in the U.S., the proliferation of openly racist discourses and exclusionary policies (directed, in particular, against undocumented workers and immigrants), or Trump’s radical stance on international trade and diplomatic relations. While Trump’s positions are no doubt extreme, one should not forget that similar shifts to the political right can also be noticed throughout Europe. As Sabine Kim and Greg Robinson have observed: “In some respects, ironically, the Trump administration forms part of a transnational movement. One can see similar trends of hostility over immigration in the Brexit campaign in Great Britain in 2016, as well as in political campaigns across the continent of Europe – with refugees as the chief targets of outrage and suspicion” – and in the “dismissive attitudes regarding international alliances” (2). I would argue that the discipline of American Studies is ideally suited to negotiate and explain such highly complex developments due to its critical interdisciplinarity as well as its transnational outlook. Many of the socio-political challenges that we face today, including the threat of terrorism, the consequences of economic globalization and global warming, or the increasing mobility of people and commodities, require an integration of interdisciplinary and transnational perspectives, and the discipline of American Studies can offer us some highly enabling tools in this context. I will use the example of one of my upper-level BA research seminars on the topic of migration and mobility to illustrate the synergy effects that an interplay between critical interdisciplinarity and transnationalism can have on understanding current developments in the U.S. and elsewhere.

Due to its origins as an area studies program during the 1930s, American Studies was from the start characterized by a degree of interdisciplinarity because of its “attempt to focus multiple disciplinary perspectives on a single geographic area” (Lattuca 8). This early form of interdisciplinarity, however, relied heavily on the category of the nation state, which further contributed to naturalizing U.S. notions of exceptionalism. This changed with the opening up of American Studies to a much wider range of (new) disciplines from the 1960s on until today, including ethnic studies, cultural studies, border studies, critical race studies, diaspora studies, gender and LGBT studies, disability studies, film and media studies, environmental studies, critical legal studies, or critical justice studies. While some scholars have expressed concerns about the extent to which this proliferation of sub-fields within American Studies may have led to a fragmentation of the discipline, I would argue that, during the 1980s and 1990s, this development went hand in hand with a highly productive turn towards a much more radical and subversive form of interdisciplinarity under the influence of poststructuralism, postmodernism and postcolonialism. This form of critical interdisciplinarity that shapes many of the topics taught and researched by American Studies scholars today “quer[ies] the conditions and consequences of knowledge production” (Parker and Samantrai 1) as it is built on the premise that all knowledge production is inherently political (Lattuca 16). It furthermore acknowledges that Enlightenment conceptualizations of knowledge as neutral, objective, universal, and therefore generalizable (Lattuca 10) had in fact led to

systemic (race, class, and gender) biases and inequalities – “inequalities [that were] naturalized by the truth claims of the academy” itself (Parker and Samantrai 7). Critical interdisciplinarity can thus be said to have “returned critique to the center of the educational enterprise” (Parker and Samantrai 6). Ultimately, it can also “assist efforts by members of marginal groups to claim subject status and political agency” (Parker and Samantrai 16). For this reason, Lattuca sees interdisciplinary approaches as “the only routes to genuine understanding and equality” (Lattuca 16) because they have the power to “transform social relations, broaden access for the disenfranchised, and thereby change the agents and the consequences of knowledge production” (Parker and Samantrai 1). The form of critical interdisciplinarity that currently shapes much of the teaching and research done in American Studies can thus be described as a means through which “competing academic protocols, standards, and logics, together with the goals and values of social justice movements, are made explicit in order to be debated, interrogated, and reshaped” (Parker and Samantrai 18). For the seminar I teach on migration and mobility, this means, in very concrete terms, that we study Central American and Mexican migratory movements to the U.S. from a wide range of disciplinary perspectives (including their historical, social, political, economic, cultural, legal, and media dimensions) as well as from the points of view of a wide range of actors involved on both sides of the border: U.S. government officials (including politicians, Border Patrol agents and local police officers) who try to justify current immigration policy decisions; private vigilante groups and neighborhood-watch organizations in U.S. border states that wish to take the protection of their communities into their own hands; U.S. employers who prefer to recruit undocumented migrants to keep their companies afloat; human rights organizations working in Mexico and along the U.S.-Mexican border to help migrants survive their often risky journey; representatives of the Mexican government who criticize the U.S. for systemic human rights violations; Mexican and Central American sociologists who explain the socio-economic push factors that drive migrants to leave their home countries (poverty, drug and gang violence, but also the negative effects of U.S.-induced economic policies such as NAFTA); Mexican villagers who profit substantially from the remittances sent home by family members working in the U.S.; the role of U.S.-funded detention centers in Mexico whose task it is to deport migrants back to their home countries; and of course migrants themselves who talk about the effects of the increasing border militarization, including a heightened exposure to violence, rape, and corrupt officials. Such an attempt to include the voices of as many agents as possible allows us to develop a much more complex and complete picture of the contemporary dynamics of Central American-U.S. migration.

This turn towards a more critical interdisciplinarity has, since the 1990s, also been accompanied by a transnational turn within American Studies. Increasingly harsh critiques of U.S.-American notions of exceptionalism as well as vocal condemnations of some of its neo-imperialist foreign policy decisions, combined with geopolitical shifts such as the end of the Cold War that reduced the U.S.’s central role as promoter of American Studies programs in Europe, have, in some of the more radical variants, started to displace the U.S. from the center of the field. Instead, closer attention is being paid to the hemispheric relations between North, Central, and South America, or the U.S.’s complex role in international cultural contexts and politico-historical conflicts. Several critics have noted that this transnational turn is not without potential pitfalls as a hemispheric study of the Americas, for example, can also be seen as a form of neo-imperialism and neo-colonialism, especially from the perspective of Latin American or Canadian Studies programs. I would maintain, however, that the advantages of this tectonic shift towards a critical transnationalism outweigh the potential difficulties in many ways: “[A] U.S.-centric version of American Studies simply tends to foreground certain research paradigms that fall within the interests of the United States while at the same time obscuring at least as many alternative paradigms that concern other

American nations' interests" (Messmer, "Introduction" 11). A critical transnationalist understanding of American Studies, on the other hand, "transcends the limitations inherent in studying one nation in isolation and can successfully address the multifaceted economic, political, and cultural interrelations of the Americas in an age of global interconnectedness and migratory movements" (Messmer, "Introduction" 12). By drawing on a wide range of migration theories in our seminar which focus on transnational interrelations (including classical economic, network, dual labor market, world systems, and cumulative causation theory), we can thus analyze to what extent historical events (the U.S.'s military interventions in Mexico and other Latin American countries) as well as contemporary political and economic measures (immigration acts focusing on family reunification, increasing border militarization, the Bracero guest worker program, NAFTA) actually contribute to producing the very streams of migrants that the U.S. so desperately and ineffectively tries to control.

In recent years, transnational American Studies approaches have also started to draw on many of the highly enabling premises of the new field of trans-area studies that can help us understand territorial areas as political, historical and cultural constructs through which a particular community defines its (cultural or national) identity. In this way, spaces (including national spaces) can be more easily recognized as shaped by multiple centers, dialectical interrelations, as well as global transborder processes, i.e. as spaces of interaction without a stable, permanent meaning, which in turn facilitates a critique of the seeming boundedness and fixity of traditional categories such as "nation" or "state" (Mielke and Hornidge 5, 12, 14-15). This approach can also further our understanding of boundaries (including political borders) as fluid socio-spatial constructs that constantly undergo renegotiations. Embracing some of these paradigms has allowed American Studies scholars to explain some of the seemingly paradoxical developments that shape our current geopolitical situation: the fact that the sovereignty of nation states is both infringed upon as well as reaffirmed at the same time; or the fact that boundaries and borders are both weakened and reinforced simultaneously as certain forms of debordering inevitably lead to new forms of rebordering. Moreover, borders themselves (not just borderlands) have become more complex; it is well known that borders do not always coincide with cultures, languages, or religions, but they also do not necessarily always coincide with geopolitical territories anymore either.

Migratory movements across the U.S.-Mexican border constitute a useful case study to illustrate this dynamic as they allow us to challenge some of the U.S.'s hegemonic national narratives and discourses of (non-) belonging that have recently been revived so effectively by President Donald Trump. Trump's restrictive definitions of national identity, which are then translated into ever more rigorously exclusionary immigration policies, often evoke images of an autochthonous American nation that prevents migrants' integration into the national imaginary while obscuring the fact that the United States has been an immigrant nation right from its inception. Moreover, a critically interdisciplinary and transnational approach within American Studies can highlight the "larger refusal of United States leaders in recent years to admit any connection between refugee crises and the nation's foreign policy" (Kim 4). Kim reminds us that "[t]hroughout the Cold War era, the United States made acceptance of refugees a rhetorical cornerstone of its foreign policy. . . . [It] made a point of opening its doors to people fleeing persecution" (Kim 4). The end of the Cold War, however, also marked the end of this humanitarian approach, a development that was further reinforced after 9/11, when foreignness started to be perceived as a threat to national security. This notion, according to Kim, "prefigure[s] the current administration's 'America First' sloganeering, wholesale denunciation of Muslims, and rejection of all forms of immigration" (Kim 5). Since 2014, this has also had a highly detrimental effect on thousands of families and unaccompanied minors seeking refuge in the U.S. after escaping from the violent conditions prevalent in their home

countries Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador. Many of them have been placed in immigrant detention centers where they await deportation back to their home countries without any chance of ever being granted asylum in the U.S.

To facilitate these deportations, the U.S. administration has also started to outsource many of its migration management measures to Mexico, which has led to what can be termed a southward movement of the U.S.-Mexican border far into Mexican territory as migrants are often apprehended, detained and deported by Mexican authorities long before they have reached the U.S.-Mexican border. This development, as we have been able to observe in our migration seminar, has created a substantial rights vacuum for migrants and refugees because many human rights obligations are not applicable extraterritorially, but it has also started to “redefine the boundaries of state control” as this form of outsourcing simultaneously increases “the U.S. government’s legal reach over vulnerable non-citizen populations even beyond national borders while at the same time decreasing [its] direct liability and accountability (Messmer, “Detention” 3, 2).

As American Studies teachers and scholars, we are at the forefront of addressing these developments, and the interdisciplinary and transnational orientation of our field – while it can be daunting at times – can provide us with highly enabling tools that will prepare our students in the best possible way to negotiate many of the multifaceted challenges of the twenty-first century.

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